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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT KIM YOUNG-SAM ON NORTH KOREA AND
DOMESTIC POLITICS

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a March 21 luncheon meeting with the Ambassador, former President Kim Young-sam (KYS) was his usual self: energetic, warm, and, above all, generous with his opinions. Warning that "communists could never be trusted," KYS expressed the concern that Washington was getting too close to Pyongyang, which could even affect the upcoming presidential elections. North Korea had not abandoned its goal of unifying the Peninsula through force. On the presidential race, KYS was categorical in assessing that Sohn Hak-kyu, who bolted from the GNP two days before, was finished as a politician. Sohn was incredibly naive, KYS said, to think that progressives in the ruling Uri Party, such as Kim Geun-tae and Chung Dong-young, would put aside their own presidential ambitions and make way for a GNP loser. Third-party candidates, or "betrayers" in the former president's vernacular, never prospered, and Sohn would be no exception. KYS was equally firm in his assessment that Lee Myung-bak would be the next president. Lee's support was broad and deep; there was no way such support could evaporate. Park Geun-hye had no chance to win either the nomination or the election, but KYS did not believe she would run as an independent. End Summary.

ROK-US ALLIANCE: FORGED IN BLOOD

¶2. (C) Former President Kim Young-sam warmly received the Ambassador at his Sangdo-dong residence -- a modest house, much smaller than those of other former presidents, Kim said.

KYS said that it was important for the Ambassador to know that an enormous majority of South Koreans were "pro-U.S." He was a college student during the Korean War, witnessing first-hand the role of the United States. Without the sacrifice of over 40,000 American lives, there would be no South Korea. It was absurd that some people in South Korea were thinking about pulling down General MacArthur's statue in Incheon. Rest assured, the former president said, this was a very small minority. The Ambassador said that he had the same impression, which he conveyed regularly to Washington. Still, these few sometimes made loud noises.

NK: "DO NOT TRUST COMMUNISTS"

¶3. (C) KYS noted that substantial progress seemed to be taking place in the Six Party Talks (6PT). Fifty-five years

in Korean politics, five of those in the Blue House, had taught him not to trust communists. Some time ago, before he became president, he had a long discussion with senior DPRK official Huh Dam. The North Korean official spent over two hours discussing two issues: the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea and the repeal of the National Security Law.

In the absence of the NSL and U.S. troops, North Koreans believed that unification was possible, Kim said. Pyongyang was still intent on unification by force. In 1950, North Korea attacked the South because U.S. troops had pulled out. There was no end to North Korean ambitions.

14. (C) For the 6PT, Kim assessed that North Korea wanted to normalize relations with the U.S. and also receive economic assistance. To be sure, much of this was no different from extortion. "More you give, more they want," Kim said. The 6PT could become a factor in unpredictable ways, for example influencing the presidential elections in South Korea, Kim said.

15. (C) The Ambassador said that the USG had no illusions about the DPRK. The February 13 Initial Actions agreement was tightly structured, specifying clearly what each side had to do to make progress. The aid would stop if North Korea did not fulfill its obligations. The United States could not have normal relations with North Korea if it had nuclear weapons or nuclear programs. All Koreans must also know that the presence of U.S. troops, as well as the ROK's own formidable capabilities, meant that North Korea could not unify the peninsula by force. The U.S.-ROK alliance was a fundamental fact deterring North Korean aggression.

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DOMESTIC POLITICS: SOHN FINISHED; LEE WILL WIN
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16. (C) Recalling that Sohn Hak-kyu had been his protege, Kim Young-sam said that Sohn had made a grave mistake in abandoning the GNP; it would mean certain political death. KYS believed that greed motivated Sohn. He had seen Sohn and his wife several months ago; they seemed so certain his popularity would increase, even though Kim had advised him that that would not be the case. Sohn was wrong to believe that the Uri or Democratic Party would welcome him. Why would they? The progressives in these parties had their own candidates, some of them tough and able. It was inconceivable that seasoned Uri politicians like Kim Geun-tae and Chung Dong-young would make room for Sohn. Also hard to believe, according to KYS, were the candidacies of academics, such as Seoul National University's Chung Un-chan, or neophytes, like Yuhan-Kimberly CEO Moon. Korean politics were not for the faint-hearted.

17. (C) Turning to GNP candidates, KYS was quite optimistic. Kim could not see how former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak could lose. Lee consistently polled over 40 percent, double the support for Park Geun-hye. Korean polls were quite reliable. In the 1991 presidential election, KYS had maintained a 7 percent lead over Kim Dae-jung throughout the campaign period; the election result was the same, victory for KYS by 7 percent. Pundits were still saying that there might be scandals in Lee's background. However, all this looking had turned up nothing.

18. (C) KYS was adamant that Park Geun-hye could not win the GNP nomination. In the end, the party had to go with the popular candidate, because the goal was to win. KYS believed that Park, unlike Sohn, would not bolt from the GNP, which translated into a certain victory for Lee Myung-bak.

COMMENT

19. (C) Elected to the National Assembly in 1954 as a 26-year-old, Kim Young-sam spent most of his career in the political opposition. Along with his life-long nemesis Kim

Dae-jung, KYS was an icon for South Korean democracy and human rights movements throughout the era of military dictatorship. In 1992, KYS became South Korea's first civilian president in more than three decades. During his presidency, KYS was forced to devote a lot of time to the North Korean nuclear issue. Domestically, he focused on political and economic reforms, including anti-corruption drives and forcing the use of real names in financial transactions. KYS was also the driving force behind the ROK's accession to the OECD in 1996, which, he believed, cemented South Korea's status as a developed nation. However, only a year later, South Korea was engulfed in the Asian financial crisis, pulling down KYS's approval ratings to single digits. Now an octogenarian, KYS, unlike KDJ, is out of politics. Still, KYS has some influence, especially in Busan, his regional base. We understand his Sangdo-dong residence continues to be the place to be seen for all aspiring Busan politicians.

VERSHBOW